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ABSTRACT

Seven panel members from universities presented their research and thinking on what makes for a quality spelling curriculum. The panel members took turns presenting their views on the spelling curriculum to an audience of approximately 500 parents and other interested persons. Panel member 1 placed major emphasis upon the teacher being able to measure what each pupil has learned in spelling. Panel member 2 emphasized the importance of using research methodology to determine which words pupils should learn to spell. Panel member 3 advocated that spelling words for pupil learning come from the pupil's misspelled words in functional writing. Panel member 4 believed that pupils should be guided in spelling words correctly as needed in functional writing. Panel member 5 advocated using spelling textbooks to help pupils achieve as much as possible in learning to spell words correctly. Panel member 6 stressed the importance of cooperative learning in assisting optimal learner achievement in spelling. Panel member 7 placed major emphasis upon experts setting high standards for all pupils to achieve in spelling. Audience members asked questions (and professors answered the questions) on topics such as: (1) overuse of textbooks; (2) collaborative learning; (3) learner input into the spelling curriculum; (4) validity of spelling research methodologies; and (5) gifted and talented pupils; and (6) low achieving pupils. (Contains 10 references.) (RS)

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Marlow Ediger

DETERMINING THE SPELLING CURRICULUM
(A PUBLIC DEBATE)

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Setting. Panel members from nearby universities are ready to present their research and thinking on what makes for a quality spelling curriculum. There are approximately 500 parents and other interested persons in the audience to listen to panel presentations and later raise questions pertaining to each panel member's ideas on improving the spelling curriculum. The chairperson has completed the introduction of panel members and is now stating the philosophical position in teaching spelling for each of the different presentations.

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Chairperson. We are all interested in which approaches should be emphasized to improve the spelling capabilities of each pupil. There is concern among parents and others that pupils are not doing well in spelling. Even with the use of personal computers, pupils still need to type in the commands accurately enough in spelling so that spell check can take care of the rest of the problems in spelling words correctly. At this time, panel member #1 is ready to present what is felt would make for the best spelling curriculum possible.

Panel member #1. We certainly can be hazy on what should be taught in spelling. I think we are too unsure of ourselves as teachers to know which is the best procedure to teach spelling. I am here to foster increased certainty on the part of parents, school administrators, and teachers pertaining to which is the best spelling program for pupils and will make for optimal achievement. First of all, I would like to ask why we have this uncertainty as to what to teach in spelling? To develop the needed certainty, we must have precise, measurably stated objectives for pupils to achieve in spelling. Within each precise objective, there are a certain number of vital words that pupils should learn to spell. At the state and local levels, we need to make careful selections of words that pupils should master and thus attain measurably stated objectives. Do not settle for less than the very best when these words for mastery learning are being chosen. The teacher than chooses learning opportunities so that pupils individually may learn to spell each word

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correctly. Next, the teacher measures to notice the success of his/her instruction. In other words, did or did not pupils attain the stated objectives of instruction? That is the key question here. Pupils achieve more than would otherwise be the case if we align the learning opportunities with the objectives as well as align the evaluation procedures with the stated objectives (Jennings, 1995). With my model of teaching spelling, it provides certainty in terms of what pupils are to achieve in spelling (Skinner, 1979).

Panel member #2. I believe my friend here, panel member #1, has simplified means of obtaining a quality spelling curriculum. How do we know which spelling words to emphasize within the framework of stressing measurably stated objectives? Answering this question is the key to implementing a good spelling program of instruction. There is only one way to stress what is vital in spelling and that is to conduct research on which words pupils need to master in spelling. There have been selected excellent studies made in the past pertaining to words that pupils need to learn to spell. But these studies lack depth, validity , and reliability. By depth, I mean that we need to have a large learner population when making a study of spelling words most frequently used by pupils in writing. Pupils in the study must come from diverse socioeconomic levels as well as different geographic regions. The number of pupils used in the study must harmonize with the per cent of people in the population that come from each of the different socio-economic levels as well as geographic regions. This is not a simple matter to determine words that pupils should master in spelling. Another problem of older research studies in spelling words that pupils need to acquire is that they are outdated. The Dolch list of 220 basic sight words was completed in 1943 and the Rinsland study in 1945. Times have changed much since that time and new research studies need to be made in depth. Necessary words for pupil mastery change in time and place. We need updated studies emphasizing the very best research methodology in determining words that our pupils need to learn to spell for each grade level. Why have pupils study the outdated and the irrelevant? Too frequently, this is exactly what teachers stress in

teaching spelling. What a waste of precious instructional time! We have ample recent research on what makes for effective schools (Squires and others, 1985). We also need to have quality research to update which words pupils should master in spelling. It can and must be done. Then we can eliminate the trivia from the spelling curriculum. Trivia wastes valuable pupil time in learning.

Panel member #3. I disagree with almost everything that has been said by my two predecessors. Why? I think we need to observe the individual pupil and select a list of spelling words that he/she has missed in functional writing and have these misspelled words become spelling words that need to be mastered. Pupils differ so much from each other in terms of what they need and desire to learn (Eisner, 1995). Each child will then have a different list of spelling words to study. This is necessary since each pupil is different from the others in terms of which words need to be acquired to become a proficient speller in school and in society. After having studied pupils in the classroom setting for twenty-five years, I realize that learners are individuals, not measurable beings nor mass members of research studies. The needs of pupils differ in spelling from one person to the next. Pupils are human beings as individuals, not products of measurement nor of research results. The focus should be upon the pupil in determining what he/she should learn, not upon external factors. A contract system may be used here in that the involved pupil with teacher guidance decides upon which words should be acquired and mastered in spelling. The due date should be decided by both pupil and teacher as to when the spelling words should be mastered (Lundsteen, 1989).

Panel member #4. It appears to me that all previous panel members stress rote learning by pupils in the correct spelling of words . You each have stressed learning to spell words as if the pupil is a sponge and can absorb more and more correctly spelled words. We need to have pupils learn to spell vital words only at the time they are misspelled. The misspelled words should not become a part of a list of words for pupils to master at a later time. I recommend a contextual approach in guiding pupils to spell words correctly. Within a writing

context, the individual pupil is provided assistance, as needed, in the correct spelling of a word. There are so many purposes in writing that pupils individually may be given help in spelling a word correctly when it becomes necessary to do so. The emphasis here is upon the pupil and his/her interests, not upon the teacher, nor textbooks, nor research results. Pupils are human beings and have diverse needs as they work on different tasks in spelling and writing. Leading educational psychologists have long recommended the child being the focal point of learning. The child's purposes in learning are paramount (Combs, 1972). What do we really have in teaching and learning if the learner is left out of the curriculum? I fear the answer to this questions is that we have nothing left.

Panel member #5. I feel too frequently we throw out the baby with the bath. We do not like tradition. We hesitate to use reputable spelling texts in our curriculum. Spelling textbooks have stood the test of time and are still used in many classrooms to teach pupils how to spell words correctly. Whenever any language arts specialist advocates change in the curriculum, he/she states the textbook must go and be replaced with something else. Why does the absence of spelling textbooks make for an updated curriculum? I fail to see any rational in this. There are writers of spelling texts for pupils who have devoted much time and effort into the final product. There are companies who publish these texts who have engaged in much expense and research in getting quality materials to teachers of pupils. Teachers' manuals in these textbooks contain objectives for teachers to emphasize in teaching and learning. There are interesting and challenging learning opportunities for pupils in spelling, and there are also quality ways of evaluating pupil progress in spelling stressed within these textbooks. Pupils have security in knowing which words they are to master each week in spelling. The teacher must see to it that pupils use these words in functional writing so that they are retained in the learner's repertoire. I ask you not to reject that which has been emphasized for years in the teaching of spelling. The spelling textbook has stood the test of time in providing a basis for pupils becoming good spellers. The teacher though must be heavily involved

in stressing quality in spelling experiences for pupils by emphasizing the best learning opportunities possible for the latter to encounter. The basal spelling textbook might well be an important resource in guiding optimal pupil achievement in spelling. There are selected principles of learning from educational psychology which teachers must use in teaching spelling. Pupil interest, purpose, and meaning must be inherent when they engage in learning opportunities to spell words correctly (Ediger, 1988).

Panel member #6. I have not heard one panel member talk about cooperative learning in the teaching of spelling. We as participants in society so often work in groups and committees. Why should the spelling curriculum always stress that individual pupils learn to spell words correctly? A much more interesting way to learn to spell words correctly is to have pupils work in cooperative learning frameworks. A heterogeneously grouped (Oakes, 1990) set of learners might then assist each other in correct spelling of words within a functional writing situation. Cooperation among learners in guiding each other to spell well when writing in a practical situation can be motivating and encouraging. When I was in grade school, I found that learning to spell words on an individual basis was routine and boring. The few times I could work cooperatively with other learners was truly exhilarating and enjoyable. Then too, I learned so much from peers in cooperative learning. No matter what the present achievement level of any one learner is, pupils in cooperative learning in spelling may learn from each other in the correct spelling of words. There are numerous resources that pupils might use to help each other in spelling words correctly. These resources include dictionaries and a thesaurus.
Panel member #7. I am the last presenter and hopefully can present the best ideas on improving the spelling curriculum. I do think I have the answer. So much of what I hear here has amounted to mediocrity among pupils in learning the correct spelling of words. I have not heard of one panel member talk about the necessity of setting high standards for all pupils to attain. Slow learners should not be held to low standards. If this is done, these pupils will be hindered later at the work place; they

will achieve at a low level at a time when we need to have productive workers who can challenge the economic advantages in productivity of such nations as Japan and Germany. Teachers need to have high expectations for all learners, not the fast achievers only. With high expectations, the teacher may obtain higher achievement levels in spelling from all pupils. Education 2000 (National Education Goals Panel, 1991) recommends goals for learner attainment on the national and state levels of government. They stress high standards for all pupils to achieve, such as US students being first in the world in science and mathematics. In all curriculum areas, there is much writing for pupils to do and writing is a basic, one of the three r's. Correct spelling is inherent within writing. No matter how much technology will be available for teachers and pupils, the correct spelling of words will always be necessary. A word processor with the spell check program still needs operators of the key board who come close enough to the correct spelling of a word or the spell check program may be of little help in offering corrective assistance. There will always be situations whereby we do not have the word processor available and need to spell words correctly with pen and pencil. I say let us have high standards in spelling for all pupils regardless of ability levels and help each to achieve at a higher level than ever before.

Chairperson. We have had excellent presentations by each panel member as to what makes for a good spelling curriculum. At this time, we would like audience participation. Are there any questions that you in the audience have of any participant? Please speak clearly into the microphone. I see a hand over there.

Audience member number one. I would like to direct my question to panel member #3. I believe too many textbooks are used in the school curriculum. Pupils frequently turn off on active engagement with exercises that come from texts. The learning opportunities then become dull and formal. I have felt for sometime, as a parent, that there should be other activities for pupils than those contained in rigid use of textbooks. There are so many excellent computerized programs that are available in guiding pupils in learning too spell words correctly. I did not

like spelling when using a basal text in grade school.

Panel member #3. The teacher makes all the difference in the world when using any material of instruction. Thus the teacher needs to capture pupils interest and make learnings meaningful as well as purposeful. The spelling textbook as a teaching material is neutral; it is neither good nor bad. The teacher then needs to take the accumulated efforts of many in time to teach so that pupils may all become good spellers from the sequential lessons in the textbook. For all materials of teaching, the teacher is the prime mover of instruction. Perhaps, you had a teacher that was not motivated to do the job well in teaching spelling. Why should we throw out literally all the work that specialists in spelling have put forth over the years in developing materials to guide each pupil to spell well? Let us use what has worked well for teachers in time. Manuals that go along with the textbook provide teachers with some good teaching suggestions. The teacher does not have to start from scratch when using the manual section in choosing objectives, learning opportunities, and evaluation procedures in teaching spelling. Rather, the teacher can build upon what is presented in the manual by using creative, novel methods of teaching.

Audience member #2. I would like to address my question to panel member #3. If we have pupils learn to spell those words they misspelled in functional writing, won't the learner use words only or largely that he/she can spell correctly? This then avoids having to study words in spelling since no or few errors were made? I would rather want my child to use a variety of vocabulary words in writing. Certainly with cooperative learning, we can have learners assist each other in the correct spelling of words.

Panel member #3. I am greatly concerned about the heavy emphasis placed upon pupils helping each other in the correct spelling of words. I want pupils to become independent, not dependent individuals. I believe each pupil must do the learning himself/herself. No one can do this for someone else. I have talked to parents who tend to feel that teachers can somehow instill knowledge and skill into the mind of a learner without the latter engaging in a lengthy process of learning.

Teaching and learning does not work that way. Teachers need to challenge pupils to use new words in writing and words that are misspelled need to be studied and mastered. Should pupils not study the correct spelling of words that they find to be useful? Is there any better way of reasoning as to which words pupils need to learn to spell?

Audience member #3. I wish to direct my question to panel member #1. I feel you have a rather simple way of showing how pupils are to learn to spell. You did not mention any learner input into the spelling curriculum. Are you going to omit the most important being in learning to spell and that is the pupil?

Panel member #1. I don't think I left out the learner in developing a quality spelling curriculum. Within the framework of measurably stated objectives, we can choose spelling words that come from studies made of relevant words pupils need to master. In my presentation, I definitely mentioned that important words need to be emphasized within the framework of the stated objectives. Each objective needs careful consideration in terms of being salient for pupils to learn. Too frequently, pupils learn trivia and I want the unimportant to be eliminated from the curriculum. Objectives are only chosen for pupil mastery if they pass the test of being vital and significant. Always match the learning opportunities in spelling with the objectives of instruction. Have the evaluation procedures measure that which is inside of each measurably stated objective.

Audience member #4. I would like to ask panel member #2 how wise it is to base a spelling curriculum on research studies of words that pupils use commonly in writing. I believe pupils differ from each other in needs as to spelling words that will be used in writing. Pupil A has different needs than pupil B and so on. When research is done, the researcher tries to come up with averages such as which spelling words does the average child need to master in spelling to become a good writer.

Panel member #2. Research results have always provided us with what should be in education, spelling included. With a carefully designed research design, the researcher attempts to determine what is

best in education. The researcher may ultimately select words that are easier to learn to spell, as well as those for average achievers, and those for gifted and talented learners. I fail to see how an approach like this emphasizes what the average achiever will learn and will achieve, no matter what the capabilities of learners are. A teacher needs to make modifications where necessary in providing for individual differences. A professional teacher always must assist each pupil to learn as much as possible in all curriculum areas, spelling included.

Audience member #5. I wish to address my question to panel member #6. How much will the gifted and talented pupil learn in cooperative learning? Slower learners will hold others back from attaining as much as possible. If the talented and gifted are to do a lot of helping the slower pupils achieve in spelling, they will attain at the lowest common denominator. The lowest common denominator is the achievement level in spelling of the slow learners. What do you recommend here?

Panel member #6. I believe pupils challenge and motivate each other in positive ways. Learners can do this and at the same time enjoy learning. John Dewey (1916), America's foremost educational philosopher, advocated pupils working in groups or in committees. There were two reasons he gave for this. First, pupils liked to work together with others and not by the self. Dewey felt that working with other seas a constructive impulse of learners. Second, in society people work together to identify and solve problems. Therefore pupils in school, in a miniature society, should also learn to work cooperatively with others. The gifted and talented provide leadership roles in cooperative learning as well as set the pace for higher achievement for all in the spelling curriculum.

Audience member #6. My question is addressed to panel member #7. My son is a slow learner and I want him to be successful in learning. I gather that your standards and goals would be so high that my son would face failure. I want the curriculum adjusted to where he is achieving presently and than move forward in achievement with continuous progress. I do not want him to experience failure in school

and later on in life. It has been painful for him to fail in requirements emphasized in school that are way to difficult to attain.

Panel member #7. I hear you and your concerns. My point is that I want all pupils to have opportunities to learn sophisticated knowledge and skills. Why have low standards for pupils which will harm the pupil later in life? Those pupils who have not had chances at sophisticated knowledge and skills will be at the bottom in the workforce later as adults. Do you want your son at the bottom of the totem pole? I say let us have high expectations for all learners. They can all attain sophisticated knowledge. Teachers, however, must teach well and truly believe that each pupil can be a star in learning. If we look at the National Council Teachers of Mathematics, the National Science Teachers Association, the International Reading Association, and The National Council for Teachers of English with their high standards set for pupil achievement, it behooves us to set our goals higher and higher. Slow learners need tutoring to stay up with the other pupils in the classroom.

Audience member #7. I would like to address my question to panel member #4. You indicated that pupils should be given help as needed in spelling when functional writing is being emphasized. I greatly fear when approaches such as these are stressed. Certainly there is a core of words that pupils should master prior to writing so that few errors in spelling are being made. I do not wish to brag, but I do feel I am a good speller. When I was in grade school, spelling textbooks were the instructional material used to provide me with the core spelling words I needed so that I would misspell very few words when writing.

Panel member #4. I have yet to meet people who got a 100 on Friday on the spelling test from the weekly list of words contained in the textbook and can spell the same words correctly in functional writing a short time later. Why? There is little or no connection between words contained in a spelling textbook for pupil mastery and the needs of pupils when words are used in different forms of written work. Let us have pupils write and not memorize the correct spelling of words. As they write, there are needs that individual pupils have in terms of words

which need to be spelled correctly in context. Memorization of correct spelling of words has no value for any pupil. Too much time has been wasted with memoriter methods of teaching spelling. Let us rather make learning useful and practical. Let us have pupils learn to spell words correctly n context as they are needed.

Chairperson. I would like to summarize what each panel member has emphasized in his/her presentation as well as from questions from the audience.

Panel member #1 placed major emphasis upon the teacher being able to measure what each pupil has learned in spelling. The results here provide feedback to pupils as well as to the teacher in terms of the quality of his/her teaching. Objective results can then be reported to parents as to how well a child is achieving in spelling. Panel member #2 emphasized the importance of using research methodology to determine which words pupils should learn to spell. A careful research design must be used to select the words that pupils need to learn to spell. Panel member #3 advocates that spelling words for pupil learning come from the latters misspelled words in functional writing. Panel member #4 believes that pupils should be guided in spelling words correctly as needed in functional writing. Panel member #5 Advocates using spelling textbooks to help pupils achieve as much as possible in learning to spell words correctly. Panel member #6 stresses the importance of cooperative learning in assisting optimal learner achievement in pupil spelling. Pupils in heterogeneous grouping might then assist each other within a committee to spell words correctly when engaged in functional writing. Panel member #7 places major emphasis upon experts setting high standards for all pupils to achieve in spelling. All are to achieve the correct spelling of these words regardless of ability and achievement levels.

I was interested in noticing where the emphasis would be placed by each panel member in selecting words for pupil mastery in spelling. I wish to thank all of you for coming to this session on which approaches need to be emphasized so that each pupil may attain as optimally as possible in spelling.

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